FILMS THAT ARE 50: GOGOLA *by Rajesh Devraj*

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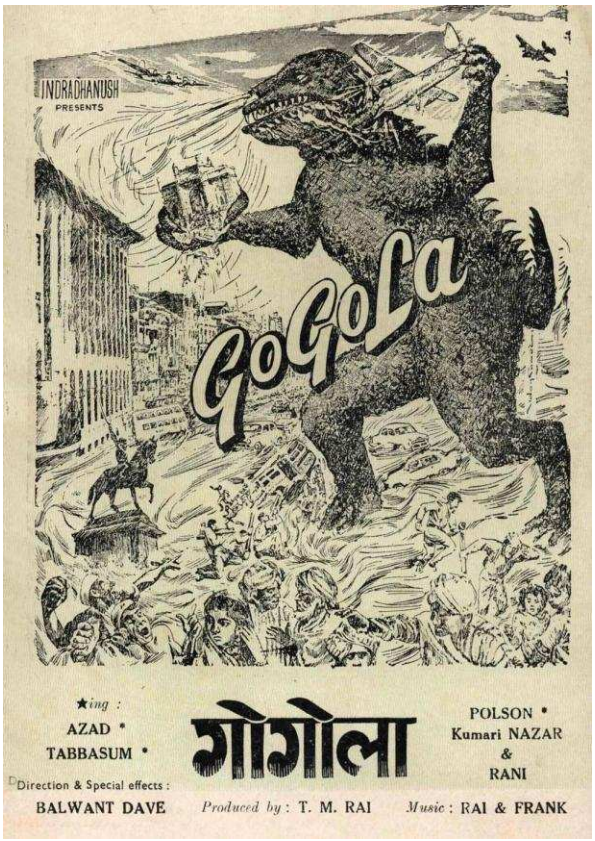
For more years than I care to mention, I have been obsessed with an obscure Hindi B-movie from the sixties called *Gogola*. It was made fifty years ago, which means it would be the film's golden anniversary this year—if one could claim with any certainty that it was ever released widely or that it has survived to this date.

While in all probability it is no lost masterpiece, *Gogola* deserves to be remembered for one good reason: it is perhaps the only Hindi film in which the central titular character is a giant prehistoric creature, an Indian cousin of Gojira, terror of the deep. As India's sole contribution to the daikaiju genre, Gogola stands apart from all other monster movies.

For those who are convinced that Indian sci-fi cinema commences with a certain two-thumbed alien, the notion of a desi Godzilla from half a century ago may of course seem quite unbelievable. So before we go any further, here's a picture of the beast in action.



You may now put your eyeballs back in their sockets, thank you. As it turns out, *Gogola* is only one of several B-movies from the '50s and '60s which graft elements of science fiction onto the usual Bollywood masala. Some have tell-tale titles such as *Rocket Girl*, *Rocket Tarzan* and *Wahan ke Log*, while other names like *Professor X* and *Dr Z* indicate a scientist character working on some world-changing invention or the other ("Insaan ko

janwar aur janwar ko insaan banane ka faarmula", proclaims one desi Dr Moreau). Invisible men and flying cars are not uncommon, nor are themes of space exploration and extra-terrestrial life unheard of in the pre-Jadoo era. Let us also not forget that Dara Singh landed on the moon a few years before Neil Armstrong, bare-chested to boot, in the 1967 film *Chand Pe Chadhai*.

Notwithstanding this history, one has to admit that there is often very little science in Indian science-fiction cinema. The moon turns out to be a fairytale kingdom ruled by a beautiful princess, the flying saucers an elaborate hoax perpetrated by a foreign hand. Gogola, unlike his Japanese predecessors, is not a radiated mutant with atomic breath, but a scourge that attacks for no apparent reason. In the end, the theme is only a pretext for staging a series of stunts and trick effects—it lends some novelty to a tried-and-tested B-movie formula, that's all.

Tellingly, *Gogola*'s director, Balwant B Dave, is also credited with the special effects in the film. Earlier in his career, Dave was a cameraman for Wadia Movietone, lensing the Fearless Nadia film *Hunterwali* (1935). It was common practice on the stunt-movie circuit to recruit cameramen adept at trick photography as directors: this may be how Dave ended up helming the action flick *White Face* in 1943, and several other B-movies subsequently.

For his *daikaiju* debut, Dave had to make one very important decision: how to show the monster. He chose to use what is sometimes called "suitmation", essentially an actor in a suit, moving through miniature model scenery to give the impression of a giant size. Since Bollywood's B-movie producers often built their movies around 'stock footage'—images surreptitiously copied from prints of foreign films—perhaps Dave did not really have a choice, and had to perforce follow the original Japanese creation.

For the suit itself, an expert was brought in: D. Malvankar, the movie industry's go-to guy for models, miniatures, burning trains, drowning ships, and what-have-you. Malvankar could make a gorilla suit or construct a fire-breathing crocodile; once he even created a lion on demand, using the most rudimentary of materials: some gunny sacks, some coir stuffing, a hide bought from Mumbai's Chor Bazaar, and a street dog. Naturally, he was unfazed by the Gogola brief. As he described it later in a television interview, the solution was easy: just stitch a large suit, shove in a few men ("ek do teen aadmi, jitne bhi ghus sakte the"), adjust here and there to allow free movement, and you were good to go.

Child's play indeed. Going by movie stills, the monster that Malvankar made resembled Barney the Purple Dinosaur more than the fearsome creature conjured up by the film's publicity artists. As he looms over Colaba Causeway, baring his misshapen teeth, there seems to be no panic in the streets: no screaming tourists, no skittering Victorias, no Parsi jalopies

careening into Cusrow Baug in the foreground. He may as well be another high-rise building blocking the sunlight.

One can only hope that the dinosaur on screen was a tad more impressive. Since no DVD or Youtube edition of the film is available, one can only turn to the film's censor script for corroboration. It's scant evidence though: such transcripts were prepared primarily to help members of the censor board identify shots for deletion, so the action is described only in the tersest of terms. You try to imagine what you can from long lists of shots: *Gogola. Tank. Gogola. Tank. Gogola. Planes. Gogola. People running*. There are pages and pages of this stuff, and then if you're lucky, Boribunder goes up in flames.

The good news here is that along with Boribunder, a great deal of South Mumbai gets destroyed as well: Gogola is one *paisa vasool* monster indeed. Much of the plot revealed by the censor transcript seems to be given over to the usual tiresome romantic and comedy tracks that pad up Indian B-movies. When Gogola shows up, however, the pages crackle with excitement. In his first appearance, the giant rises from the depth of the ocean to charge at picknickers on a beach. Mumbai's finest react as only they can: at first, they deny outright that the creature exists. Later, when compelled to take action, they chase it all the way to the sea-shore—and then stop right there, claiming they have no jurisdiction over the ocean. Gogola, thankfully, is not bothered with such red tape. He returns to Apollo Bunder, mean and mad as hell, to set off a flurry of expositional dialogue in the control rooms: "Gogola? Kaun Gogola? Bada janwar? Kya kaha, Gateway ko utha liya? Kidhar jaa raha hai? Flora Fountain ki taraf? OK! OK!"

Summary of sequence: Gogola lifts up the Gateway of India, exits right, throws down a motor car at Sir Cowasji Jehangir Hall, and discards the remains of the Gateway at Flora Fountain, creating a heap of rubble that takes all of eight days to clear, as we are later told. All this is of course considerably less awesome than it sounds, if you remember that Gogola carrying the Gateway looks quite like your eight-year-old in a dino costume, taking a model to the school fair. But never mind, never mind: our monster's on a roll now, bringing down planes and tanks with fiery breath, flooding the streets with water. Boribunder, Churchgate, Marine Drive, Victoria Terminus, they all fall to the rising tide, as does every posh cinema from Metro to Eros and Maratha Mandir, in what may well be a B-movie director's fantasy of revenge.

And then finally, it's time for the hero to come face to face with the unspeakable terror that is Gogola, but no, wait, this is Bollywood, so everyone has to sing 'Nacho, nacho, Gogola' first. Once the song-and-dance gods are appeased, the plot is allowed to resume. A shadow looms over the city's devastated skyline once again, and the stage is set for what reads like an epic climactic sequence—or maybe it's just the same footage looped for seven minutes, one really can't tell. There are more shots of Gogola on the

rampage, more planes and tanks, more hellfire, and for good measure, every familiar city landmark is destroyed all over again. Eventually, we read the dreadful words ‘Gogola haddi ka dhancha hota hai’ on the page. A series of shots with the characters repeating the line ‘Gogola mar gaya’, and then someone says ‘Very good’. End title, cue music.

[Youtube link: Nacho Nacho Gogola]